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Beltane: Its History And Modern Celebration In Wicca In America

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The celebration of May 1st, or Beltane as it is known in Wicca Circles, is one of the most important festivals of our religious year. I will attempt here to answer some of the most often asked questions about this holiday. An extensive bibliography follows the article so that the interested reader can do further research.

Where Does The Festival Of Beltane Originate?

Beltane, as practiced by modern day Witches and Pagans, has its origins among the Celtic peoples of Western Europe and the British Isles, particularly Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

What Does The Word Beltane Mean?

Dr. Proinsias MacCana defines the word as follows: " the Irish name for May Day is Beltane, of which the second element, `tene', is the word for fire, and the first, `bel', probably means `shining or brilliant'."[1] (beltane_history_modern.php#1) The festival was known by other names in other Celtic countries. Beltaine in Ireland, Bealtunn in Scotland, Shenn do Boaldyn on the Isle of Mann, and Galan Mae in Wales.[2] (beltane_history_modern.php#2)

What Was The Significance Of This Holiday To The Ancients?

To the ancient Celts, it symbolized the coming of spring. It was the time of year when the crops began to sprout, the animals bore their young, and the people could begin to get out of the houses where they had been cooped up during the long dark cold winter months. Keep in mind that the people in those days had no electric lights or heat, and that the Celtic counties are at a much more northerly latitude than many of us are used to. At that latitude, spring comes much later, and winter lasts much longer than in most of the US. The coming of fair weather and longer daylight hours would be most welcome after a long cold and dark winter.

How Did The Ancient Celts Celebrate This Festival?

The most ancient way of observing this day is with fire. Beltane, along with Samhain (Nov. 1), Imbolc (Feb. 1), and Lughnassadh (Aug. 1), was one of the four great "fire festivals" which marked the turning points of the Celtic year. The most ancient records tell us that the people would extinguish all the hearth fires in the country and then relight them from the "need fires" lit by the druids (who used friction as a means of ignition). In many areas, the cattle were driven between two great bonfires to protect them from disease during the coming year. It is my personal belief, although I have no documentation to back up the assumption, that certain herbs would have been burnt in the fires, thus producing smoke which would help destroy parasites which might make cattle and other livestock ill.

In What Other Ways Was This Festival Celebrated?

One of the most beautiful customs associated with this festival was "bringing in the May." The young people of the villages and towns would go out into the fields and forests at Midnight on April 30th and gather flowers with which to bedeck themselves, their families, and their homes. They would process back into the villages, stopping at each home to leave flowers, and to receive the best of food and drink that the home had to offer. This custom is somewhat similar to "trick or treat" at Samhain and was very significant to the ancients. John Williamson, in his study, The Oak King, the Holly King, and the Unicorn, writes, "These revelers were messengers of the renewal of vegetation, and they assumed the right to punish the niggardly, because avarice (as opposed to generosity) was dangerous to the community's hope for the abundance of nature. At an important time like the coming of summer, food, the substance of life must be ritually circulated generously within the community in order that the cosmic circuit of life's substance may be kept in motion (trees, flocks, harvests, etc.)."[3] (beltane_history_modern.php#3) These revelers would bless the fields and flocks of those who were generous and wish ill harvests on those who withheld their bounty.

What About Maypoles?

The maypole was an adjunct to the festival of bringing in the May. It is a phallic symbol, and as such represented fertility to the participants in the festival. In olden days, the revelers who went into the woods would cut a tree and bring it into town, decking it with flowers and greenery and dance around it, clockwise (also called deosil, meaning "sun-wise", the direction of the sun's apparent travel across the face of the Earth) to bring fertility and good luck. The ribbons which we associate with the maypole today were a later addition.

Why Was Fertility Important?

The people who originated this custom lived in close connection with the land. If the flocks and fields were fertile, they were able to eat; if there was famine or drought, they went hungry. It is hard for us today to relate to this concept, but to the ancients, it was literally a life and death matter. The Celts were a very close tribal people, and fertility of their women literally meant continuity of the tribe.

How Is The Maypole Connected With Fertility?

Many scholars see the maypole as a phallic symbol. In this aspect, it is a very powerful symbol of the fertility of nature and spring.

How Did These Ancient Customs Come Down To Us ?

When Christianity came to the British Isles, many of the ancient holy sites were taken over by the new religion and converted to Christian sites. Many of the old Gods and Goddesses became Christian saints, and many of the customs were appropriated. Charles Squire says," An ingenious theory was invented after the introduction of Christianity, with the purpose of allowing such ancient rites to continue with a changed meaning. The passing of persons and cattle through flame or smoke was explained as a practice which interposed a magic protection between them and the powers of evil."[4] (beltane_history_modern.php#4) This is precisely what the original festival was intended to do; only the definition of "evil" had changed. These old customs continued to be practiced in many

areas for centuries. "In Scotland in 1282, John, the priest in Iverkething, led the young girls of his parish in a phallic dance of decidedly obscene character during Easter week. For this, penance was laid upon him, but his punishment was not severe, and he was allowed to retain his benefice."[5] (beltane_history_modern.php#5)

Were Sacrifices Practiced During This Festival?

Scholars are divided in their opinions of this. There is no surviving account of sacrifices in the legends and mythology which have come down to us. As these were originally set down on paper by Christian monks, one would think that if such a thing had been regularly practiced, the good brothers would most certainly have recorded it, if for no other reason than to make the pagans look more depraved. There are, however, some surviving folk customs which point to a person representing the gloom and ill fortune of winter being ostracized and forced to jump through the fires. Some scholars see this as a survival of ancient human sacrificial practices. The notion that animals were sacrificed during this time doesn't make sense from a practical standpoint. The animals which had been retained a breeding stock through the winter would either be lean and hungry from winter feed, or would be mothers nursing young, which could not be spared.

How Do Modern Day Pagans Observe This Day?

Modern day pagan observances of Beltane include the maypole dances, bringing in the May, and jumping the cauldron for fertility. Many couples wishing to conceive children will jump the cauldron together at this time. Fertility of imagination and other varieties of fertility are invoked along with sexual fertility. In Wiccan and other Pagan circles, this is a joyous day, full of laughter and good times.

What About Walpurgisnacht? Is This The Same Thing As Beltane?

Walpurgisnacht comes from an Eastern European background, and has little in common with the Celtic practices. I have not studied the folklore from that region and do not consider myself qualified to write about it. As the vast majority of Wiccan traditions today stem from Celtic roots, I have confined myself to research in those areas.

Footnotes

1. MacCana, Proinsias, Celtic Mythology, The Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, London, 1970, p.32.
2. Squire, Charles, Celtic Myth and Legend, Poetry and Romance, Newcastle Publishing Co., Van Nuys, CA, 1975, p.408.
3. Williamson, John, The Oak King, the Holly King, and the Unicorn, Harper & Row, NY, 1986, p.126.
4. Squire, p.411.
5. Hole, Christina, Witchcraft In England, Rowman & Littlefield, Totowa, NJ, 1977, p.36.

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